

# **Current urban transport system will lead to economic and environmental meltdown**

**Associate Professor Nicholas Low – University of Melbourne**

Australia's current urban transport system is expensive, unhealthy and dangerous, and unless large-scale changes are made in the next 50 years our cities risk economic and environmental collapse.

Global warming is a real threat and is driving the need for a total rethink of urban transport delivery.

Melbourne's transport system is one of the most costly anyone could design. It is based on a system where people are pushed into private vehicles, urban areas are dispersed indiscriminately, and vast new urban fringe highways are built. The planning and management of all forms of public transport has disintegrated and we spend almost nothing on walking and cycling.

No-one planned our urban transport systems. They just grew up with the private motor vehicle. For Melbourne to remain a vibrant and economically successful city – one of the 'most liveable in the world' – comprehensive urban transport planning should take centre stage.

The immense cost of our present urban transport system not only involves money for provision of roads, public transport and transport governance, but also involves expenses for each private vehicle owner, multiplied by the vehicle-owning population of the city. Then there are the government subsidies flowing to vehicle ownership and the cost of congestion generated by traffic attracted by improved roads.

There is also the cost of vehicle accidents, health costs caused by poisonous gas and particle emissions, and of obesity resulting from sitting in cars.

Finally, the costs of global warming from greenhouse gas emissions must be included.

This expense is likely to be the biggest of all. The difficulty of working out the cost of climate change with any degree of certainty does not justify leaving it out of the calculation. We have no option but to adapt to the climate conditions imposed by twentieth century industry and transport.

The UN report 'Climate Change 2001' highlights the fact that, for natural systems, adaptation to climate change is reactive. With human systems it can also be proactive. Our transport systems have to be part of a process of proactive anticipation.

Through a combination of transport modes in which public transport, cycling and walking play a larger role, a much less costly outcome can be delivered than one in which everyone is expected to own a car and drive it for most urban journeys. Unfortunately, Australian governments have not typically relied on such planning, and they continue to make a number of mistakes.

Funding for transport modes – such as road, rail, and bus travel – is always considered in separate packages rather than as part of the entire transport system. Money spent by individuals is considered to be their own business and is never accounted for in the cost of our transport system.

The costs to public health and of climate impacts are routinely ignored. When the social and environmental costs of major projects such as motorways are considered, it is only *after* the project has been designed, and *after* public expectations have been raised.

At this stage abandonment of the project is politically unacceptable – not one major road project has ever been abandoned as a result of an environmental impact study.

Groups that propose new motorways often consider travel to be something people desire, rather than a daily burden borne by each individual — as it usually is in cities. When a major road project is proposed it is justified by time saved in travel. This is then purported as a benefit of the project, even if the total burden of travel has been increased. By dispersing activities new motorways will always increase the overall need for travel in the city.

We cannot solve the problems of future urban transport by worshipping private vehicles and pouring money into roads, in the mistaken pursuit of a congestion-free 'open road.'

This century heralds two looming economic crises: global warming and limited supply of oil. As it happens we are lucky. The peak of oil production, forcing petrol prices skywards on a never ending escalator, may well be the stimulus for action which will also help mitigate global warming.

Planning for the future should not involve faith in technology alone. Ways of burning fossil fuel without emitting greenhouse gas or providing a substitute for fossil fuel are not the only methods that will reduce the impact of emissions.

The way to meet the challenge of global warming in Australia is to manage urban transport in a proactive rather than reactive manner. This requires sustained research of a kind rarely undertaken anywhere in the world.

Nicholas Low is Associate Professor in the Urban Planning Program of the University of Melbourne, and Director of the Australasian Research Centre for Governance and Management of Urban Transport